

# Game of Chicken in the Gulf

Why an Iran-U.S. conflict looks like a realistic possibility



STANLY JOHNY

When two powers are heading towards each other in an escalating game for leverage, the situation is often referred to as a Game of Chicken. This is a concept in game theory. The strategic calculus of the Game of Chicken is that each player thinks the other will either slow down or swerve away and therefore become the "chicken". This will not only avoid a crash, but also give the persistent player an advantage over the other. The risk of the game, of course, is that if no player backs off, a crash is certain.

There is no better theoretical description to understand the Iran-U.S. tensions that are unfolding now. U.S. President Donald Trump began the escalation by pulling the country out of the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. He then reimposed crippling sanctions on Iran, termed a branch of the Iranian armed forces a terrorist group, and sent more troops to West Asia in a bid to force "behaviour change" in Tehran. The U.S. administration calls this strategy the "maximum pressure" approach. But with Iran now threatening to breach the nuclear deal and increasing anti-U.S. military rhetoric, this strategy appears to be failing. As a result, war clouds have gathered over the Gulf with U.S.-Iran ties sinking to levels seen in the final years of George W. Bush's presidency.

## Returning to talks

Unlike some members of his administration, Mr. Trump has said he doesn't want a war with Iran. But he was unhappy with the nuclear deal reached between Iran and world powers in 2015 under his predecessor, Barack Obama. The deal, its critics argued, paid Iran for not making a nuclear bomb, while leaving unaddressed critical issues such as its ballistic missile programme and its "disruptive" activities in the region. Mr. Trump wants Iran to return to talks on terms set by the U.S. so that they can renegotiate the nuclear issue. He may have hoped that the "maximum



"War clouds have gathered over the Gulf with U.S.-Iran ties sinking to levels seen in the final years of George W. Bush's presidency." Iranians at a rally in May in Tehran after U.S.-Iran tensions escalated. ■ AFP

pressure" the U.S. has put on Iran would force it to return to the table. The sanctions have been effective in isolating and choking Iran's economy. After the U.S.'s pullout, the nuclear deal was practically a dead agreement. The other signatories to the deal – the U.K., France, Germany, Russia, China and the European Union (EU) – did nothing concrete to save Iran from U.S. sanctions. Corporations that had shown interest in investing in Iran, including Chinese companies, pulled out after the sanctions. The U.S. also scared off the top-buyers of Iran's oil, including India, resulting in a massive drop in Iran's oil exports. But where Mr. Trump erred was in his calculation that economic misery would force Iran to give up its resistance and return to talks.

## Back to hostility

Iran has cooperated with the U.S. in the past. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, it assisted the U.S. war in Afghanistan. It arrested and deported Taliban members who crossed into its territory and also conducted search and rescue operations for downed U.S. aircrew members. Iran also played a critical role in the formation of the first post-Taliban Afghan government. But thereafter, the U.S. turned hostile to Iran, with President Bush lumping the country together with Iraq and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil".

With help from the European powers and Russia and China, President Obama got the Iranians to the table. After months-long painstaking diplomatic engagement, all sides agreed to the nuclear deal, which scuttled Iran's nuclear programme in return for the lifting of international sanctions. After the deal was signed, the U.S. and Iran cooperated in Iraq in the fight against the Islamic State (IS). But once the direct war against the IS in Iraq was over, Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal.

## Iran's options

Broadly, Iran has a choice of tactical pathways. One was to return to talks on the U.S.'s terms and negotiate another nuclear deal for sanctions relief. But this would have been humiliating for nationalist Ayatollahs who have built their political capital on anti-Americanism since 1979.

The second was to wait out Mr. Trump's presidency and hope that his successor would take the U.S. back to the nuclear deal. This is still not impossible as there are Democratic presidential candidates who back the deal. But with sanctions biting, Iran can't wait till the next U.S. presidential election. Also, there's no certainty that Mr. Trump will not be re-elected.

The third option was to force the EU to defy U.S. sanctions and save the deal. Iran, in fact, waited for a year after the U.S. pullout for the oth-

er members to come up with a solid mechanism to save the deal. When it did not materialise – the EU has set up a channel with Iran called Instex (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges), but this is used mainly for transacting essential goods, not high-value exports such as oil and gas – Iran moved to the last option, "maximum resistance" to "maximum pressure".

Iran's response has been gradual. In May, it gave a 60-day deadline to other signatories to fix the deal and also vowed to keep unspent enriched uranium and heavy water, which it had been exporting ever since the deal was sealed. This week, as the deadline is set to expire in two weeks, Tehran said it will keep the low-enriched uranium and threatened to begin enriching the uranium to higher levels of purity. Under the agreement, Iran is allowed to enrich uranium to 3.67%, which it plans to raise to 20%, taking the country closer to weapons-grade level (90%). If Iran starts producing high-enriched uranium, it would be a breach of the nuclear deal.

This may sound dangerously aggressive, but it is not totally irrational. First, it proves that Mr. Trump's "maximum pressure" doesn't work. Second, it holds Mr. Trump primarily responsible for the collapse of the deal and seeks to deprive the U.S. of any help from Europe in the event of a conflict. Third, if Iran is actually responsible for the tanker attacks in the Gulf, it is an indication to countries dependent on oil that flows through the Strait of Hormuz what disruption caused by war would look like. If Iran is not behind the attacks, the "maximum pressure" strategy has raised the stakes so high that even a third party is capable of carrying out false flag attacks to trigger an all-out conflict. Either way, Iran is using counter-escalation for deterrence.

But the danger in the Game of Chicken is that the risk of a crash is always there unless one power swerves away. Will Mr. Trump do so after realising that his "maximum pressure" approach has failed? Or will Iran be able to sustain its "maximum resistance" in the wake of continued U.S. targeting? If not, there will be war.

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# State of the artefacts

The discourse surrounding the identification of stolen cultural property should not be politicised



ROHAN P. KOTHARI

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has seldom found itself in the gleam of the public eye. Its work does not necessarily contain the stuff of high drama. The ASI is seen as a bespectacled, burrowing outlier amongst the larger governmental bodies that line the avenues of central Delhi.

However, this has changed since famed art dealer Subhash Kapoor's arrest in Tamil Nadu, and the subsequent unearthing of a multi-million dollar antiques smuggling racket. Kapoor was at the centre of that racket. 'Operation Hidden Idol', initiated by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, eventually culminated in the seizure of several hundred historically significant artefacts. Over 200 of these were returned to India in June 2016, but many still remain on American soil.

In May, the ASI released a statement that two of its officials had visited New York and identified close to 100 antique objects in a tranche seized by the U.S. investigative authorities from Kapoor's storage units. This statement was purportedly given to a news agency, without any press release being made available either through the ASI or the Ministry of Culture. A post on the ASI's Facebook page made things clearer: out of more than 230 items in the possession of the Indian Consulate in New York, close to 100 had been identified and declared to be antiques. The post trailed off stating that the Consulate would be advised to transport the antiques back to India. While there is some confusion in the media about how many objects are currently with the Indian Consulate, it is clear that the return of these objects to India is likely to take significant time.

## Asking all the wrong questions

There is little point in discussing how delayed the ASI's or the Indian government's response in general has been compared to foreign agencies engaged in the work of repatriation of cultural property. The Homeland Security Investigations's International Operations Division, which deals with tracking illegally smuggled antiques, has 64 attaché offices in 46 countries. India's Idol Wing can barely manage Tamil Nadu. We have not prioritised the conservation of our

heritage enough, and it is a concern that has remained alive for decades. However, what is of more immediate relevance is the discourse surrounding the identification of stolen cultural property.

Instead of seeking answers to questions germane to the identification of the artefacts, such as why it took so long or how many objects still remain to be identified/returned, popular TV news bulletins turned the conversation towards base, communal sentiment. Tickers were populated with questions such as "Does no one care about Hindu heritage?" Or, "Why is Hindu Heritage loot not a poll issue?" They referred to the fact that the antiquities identified included idols from Hindu temples. These are not the ways in which the public ought to be informed about the ASI's work, and it is irresponsible for the news media to controversialise a dialogue that has barely been understood.

## Not another photo op, please

S. Vijay Kumar, co-founder of the India Pride Project, had written with uncanny foresight that the absence of a robust idol theft investigation apparatus "threatens to turn the present identification into just another photo opportunity". It is therefore not altogether unsound to picture election rallies where crowds are riled up on the plank of a new-found zest for lost idols. Indeed, in the recent past, efforts have been made by the current political dispensation to present itself as a stalwart of India's heritage, albeit not activated by the purest motivations. Whatever the posturing might be about, the agencies in charge of securing the return of stolen antiques have little to show, or have shown very little so far.

Awareness about laws to protect India's ancient heritage is negligible. Working under unreasonable resource constraints, India's bureaucratic and investigative agencies are doing far less than they can. In a climate that is already so apathetic, it is no one's real gain to politicise and cheapen the issue of safeguarding our past.

Some may remember the kind of scathing criticism that the ASI came under from the academic community when it released its report on the purported remains of a temple under the Babri Masjid. Allegations had been made that it had misplaced its scientific temper, handling the survey with a predetermined goal in mind. A loss in credibility cannot be allowed to happen, not when so many of our public institutions are falling into decay.

Rohan P. Kothari is a Bengaluru-based advocate

## SINGLE FILE

# Water woes

The crisis in Tamil Nadu shows that we have a lot to learn about rainwater harvesting from our ancestors

MARKANDEY KATJU



In *Delhi Water Supply & Sewage Disposal Undertaking v. State of Haryana* (1996), the Supreme Court said, "Water is a gift of nature. Human hand cannot be permitted to convert this bounty into a curse, an oppression."

But human beings have converted water into precisely that in Tamil Nadu, where

there is now an acute shortage of water. Many people are struggling to find adequate water in Chennai and other parts of the State. There are pictures going around of rows of women holding plastic buckets and waiting for tankers. IT firms, restaurants and the construction industry have all admitted that they are struggling without water. Clashes over water have been reported in some parts. It is a bad situation.

Yes, there was no rainfall last year, which is why major reservoirs that supply water to the city are drying up. But could this situation not have been anticipated by the authorities? Could there not have been timely desilting of lakes?

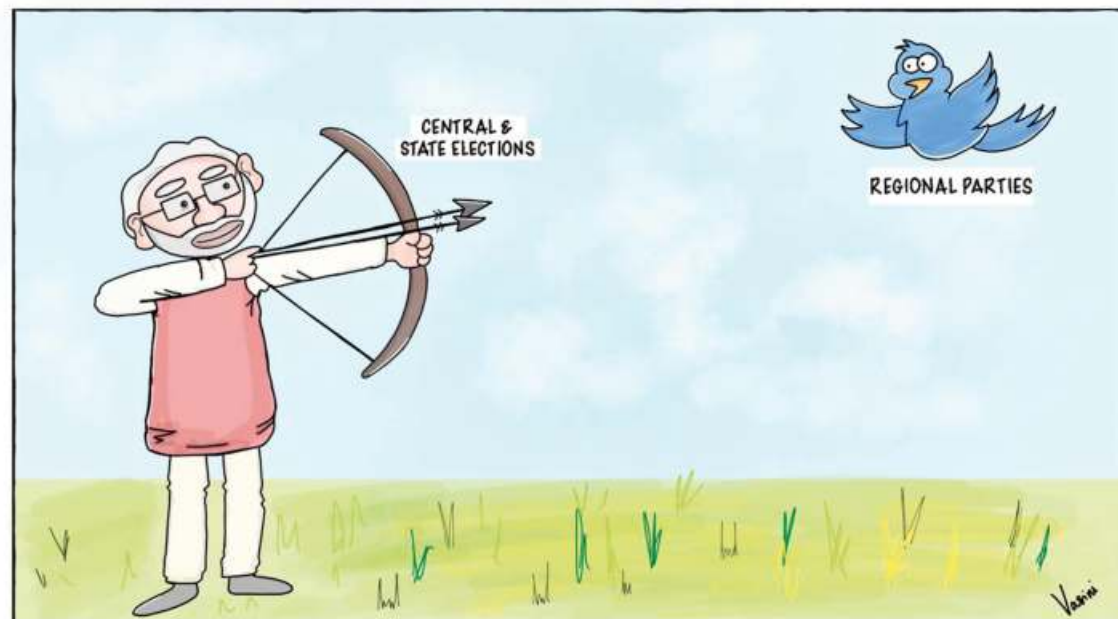
Our ancestors knew that there would be drought in the future. That is why they built ponds in and near every village, and tanks in every temple. They knew how to harvest water. There were tanks even in the Harappa-Mohenjodaro civilisation. Have we learnt more water harvesting techniques or have we gone backwards in the past few millennia?

There was acute water shortage in Tamil Nadu when I was Chief Justice of the Madras High Court in 2004-2005. In *L. Krishnan v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2005), a Bench that I had presided over noted that most of the lands marked in the revenue records of the State as ponds or lakes had been encroached on. Illegal houses and shops had been constructed in those areas. The Bench directed removal of all these illegal encroachments. In *M.K. Balakrishnan v. Union of India* (2009), I presided over a Bench of the Supreme Court. We noted the acute water shortage in several States, and set up a committee chaired by Thirumalachari Ramasami, a former Secretary in the Union Ministry of Science and Technology, to work out scientific solutions to the problem.

In China, some parts experienced frequent floods, while others experienced drought. The Huang He was known as the 'river of sorrow'. After the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the authorities constructed huge dams. Canals were built to carry excess water to areas with drought. Flood as well as drought problems were solved. Why could not this have been done in India?

I appeal to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu to immediately set up a committee comprising scientists, administrators and other eminent people to consider the seriousness of the problem and find solutions.

Markandey Katju is a former judge of the Supreme Court

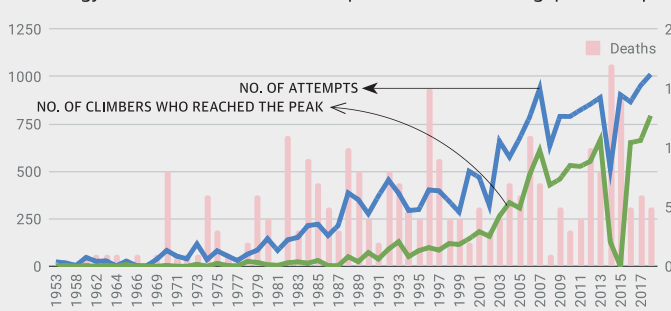


## DATA POINT

# Test of Everest

Since 2000, there has been a sharp increase in the number of people attempting to scale Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak. In about 61% of the expeditions between 1921 and 2018, the climbers were able to reach the summit. As many as 295 people died trying to conquer the peak in that period. By Varun B. Krishnan and Sumant Sen

**MORE CLIMBERS & SUCCESSES** The highest number of attempts to scale the peak were made in 2018\*. Success rates have improved over the years due to better technology. In 2015 no one reached the top due to the devastating quake in Nepal

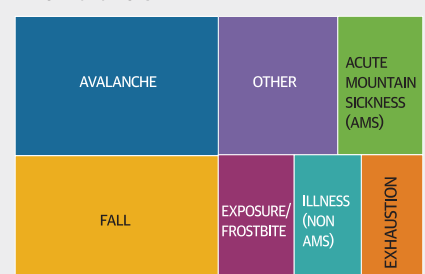


**EXPERT CLIMBERS** Nepali nationals, several of them from the Sherpa community, attempted and reached the peak the most number of times. They also have the highest success rate. Indian climbers have the fourth highest success rate

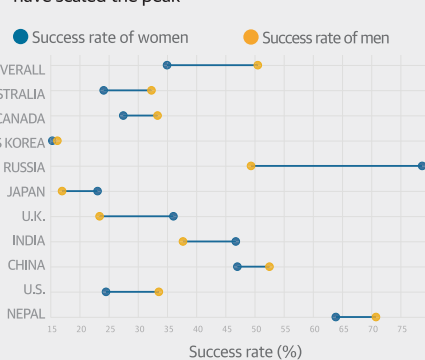


SOURCE: THE HIMALAYAN DATABASE (UPDATED TILL 2018) | NOTE: \*COUNT DOES NOT INCLUDE MULTIPLE SUCCESSES BY THE SAME PERSON IN THE SAME SEASON

**CAUSES OF DEATH** Falls and acute mountain sickness were the most common causes of deaths. Avalanches killed a significant number of climbers in 2014 and 2015



**BETTER SUCCESS FOR WOMEN** Women have a better success rate than men among Russian, Indian and U.K. climbers. But overall more men have scaled the peak



## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 20, 1969

## Priority for housing

(From an Editorial)

The backlog in housing goes on mounting, because the building effort has lagged far behind need. Mr. K. K. Shah, Union Minister, is not the first of Government spokesmen to admit this gap, but his warning against the socially explosive consequences of any further neglect of this prime need of millions living in substandard conditions should stir the State Housing Ministers in conference at Bangalore to some dynamic action at least now. The difficulty in financing other sectors of the Plans has led the Government to relegate allocations for housing to a minor place. Even so, the tempo of new construction could be stepped up if the urge of most citizens to possess their own homes is capitalised by intelligent official policies. Mr. Shah has done well to emphasise this means of getting thousands of new houses built on a hire-purchase basis, and there is no doubt that many middle class people will tighten their belts to save some money to meet the instalment commitment.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 20, 1919.

## An offensive term.

In dismissing the appeal of an Indian who claimed damages from a European for terming him a 'coolie,' the Judge President of the Natal Provincial Division of the Supreme Court said: "Whatever might be the significance attaching to the term 'coolie' in India, what they were concerned with was its meaning in Natal, and the people affected could not expect Europeans here to have a knowledge of a class distinction and of the customs ruling in India, and therefore could not be surprised if such find distinctions were misunderstood by the Europeans in Natal." Now we should say, says 'Indian Opinion' commenting on this grotesque view, that that is not a fair view of the matter; we venture to say that the most ignorant European in Natal knows full well that, when he calls an Indian, not of the labouring class, a 'coolie,' the term is offensive.

## CONCEPTUAL

# Rotten kid theorem

FAMILY ECONOMICS

The rotten kid theorem says that in the presence of parents who care equally about the welfare of all their children, even selfish children within the family may possess a strong incentive to be kind to their siblings. This is because any harm caused by the selfish child to the other children in the family will push the parents to allocate more wealth to the well-being of the other children and will in turn reduce the selfish child's own share of the family wealth. The rotten kid theorem was proposed by American economist Gary Becker in his 1974 paper, "A theory of social interactions".

## MORE ON THE WEB

Watch: Family builds their house around a 150-year-old tree

bit.ly/FigTreeHouse